



# Research Notes Work-Life Balance as an Innovative Concept and its Potential Influence on Japanese Family Life

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## Research Note

# Work-Life Balance as an Innovative Concept and its Potential Influence on Japanese Family Life

**Tabea Bienek**

Freie Universität Berlin

In this article, I systematically explore how Work-Life Balance (WLB) in recent years became a concept in Japan to focus on the solution of social problems like the declining birthrate or the balance of work and family. I will show how political measures have been implicated and if the intention of these measures has been fruitful to Japanese society regarding the potential WLB bears. The idea of WLB in Japan is focussed on the balance of work and family in order to make Japanese family life easier and bring family members together. It also aims to bring back women to the working force after giving birth. How is Japanese society corresponding to these ideas of WLB? Providing that measures will be implemented by the government and the working environment, WLB strategies in Japan can be used to change Japanese family life and life style. Although the aim is very high, WLB measures already do have a visible influence on family life.

**Keywords:** Work-Life Balance, Japanese family, balance of work and family in Japan

## 1. Introduction

Nowadays having both parents working seems to be normal for German children. According to the Federal Statistical Office there are more than 50% of double income households in Germany. This also does not seem to be unusual for Japanese families. But regarding the official statistics on working women this is a rather new development.

If we talk about Japanese working women in the age range of 30 to 50 years one can see that in accordance with the Work and Life Balance Report 2012 especially the number of permanent female employees has been growing during the last twenty years. The so called M-curve<sup>1</sup> is flattening which means a lot of women do not quit their job when giving birth to a child. In 1985 only about 50% of the Japanese women used to be employed in their twenties and thirties while starting a family. Due to the structure and the conditions of the Japanese labor market most of these working women were working part-time. More than twenty years later the percentage of

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1 The M-Curve is a graph showing the percentage of women over 15 in the labour force with the age brackets 20 to 24 and 45 to 49 being two peaks. The reason for the peaks and the flattening in between is that a majority of women quit their jobs when they get married or give birth to a child, and re-enter the labour market when their children have grown up.

working women has risen up to about 60% and is still growing. We are also not solely talking about women working part-time but about female full-time workers.

This fact automatically leads to the problem of balancing work and family life. Demographic change is not confined to Japan; the birth rate in developed countries is sinking rapidly. In Japan the fertility rate has recently grown a little and as of June 2013 is 1.41. It always used to be the role of mothers to bring up their children. Full-time housewives are called *sengō shufu* and were idealized in the Japanese society (Fujita 1989). We can even observe from other statistics and research that paired with the housework the education of children is one of the main duties of Japanese mothers which developed strongly after the war and during the growing economy of the 1960s (Watanabe 2011). However regarding the high employment rate of women in Japan nowadays, which circumstances will increase the chance for young couples to decide on starting a family with children? And if women keep working after giving birth who is taking care of the children?

For a certain time it was still common in Japan to include the husband's parents into family life and it was therefore possible for parents to get some help in education and care of the children. But a look at the lifestyle habits in Japan shows us that grandparents often live far away from their children and grandchildren. Some of them are also still working and may therefore not be able to help young mothers with the education of their grandchildren.

Another fact we have to keep in mind is the role of Japanese fathers. While in Britain for example – according to a recent study conducted by the Office for National Statistics – there has been a rise in the number of men staying at home to bring up children and an increase in the number of working mothers, in Japan almost no similar trend exists. The father's role in family was and concerning to the Annual Reports on the State of the Formation of a Gender Equal Society of the Japanese Cabinet Office still strongly is seen as the role of the breadwinner. Fathers are usually considered as those with the financial responsibility for their families, but as a consequence time for family life and their own well-being is limited. Since fathers are at work most of the day, it is difficult for them to be integrated into family life, including their children's education.

Combining work and family life therefore poses a challenge for Japanese families not only for mothers but also for the family as a whole since parents always used to live according to rather separated roles. It is also challenged by Japanese politics and economy. In this article I would like to discuss the potential of WLB measures as they have been applied in the west and specifically how they influenced policy and life in Japan. In my opinion trying to implement at least some WLB measures is an innovative concept to help Japanese families to live a balanced and happy life.

This article is organised as follows. After giving an overview of the term WLB and its meaning, I will examine how WLB theories were implemented in Japan and I discuss why they still lack strength. In the third chapter, I lay out some factors concerning the potential of WLB on Japanese families. Finally, in conclusion I discuss some theoretical and political implications.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Although WLB problems already occurred before the 1970s, sociologists began studying this issue in recent decades. Why did this happen? What is it nowadays that makes WLB problems considered to be an important problem to solve? Before heading for the implementation and development of WLB in Japan I will therefore first give a short review on the roots of WLB and, in regard to society's changing needs, what sort of potential this concept provides.

### (1) Roots and Definition of WLB

WLB stems from the idea that there is a difference between the two categories 'work' and 'life'. These categories should be balanced (Kastner 2004). However both terms are very difficult to define and the critic's discussions about the separation of work and life and the definition of work – if it is paid employment or includes voluntary work – are diverse (Guest 2002; Greenhaus, Collins, Shaw 2003).

According to John et al. the distinction between work and play dates back to the mid 1800s (John et al. 2010: 172). Therefore it is not a new concept. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, some nations began establishing labor limitations for women as The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 introduced the 40-hour workweek in the United States<sup>2</sup>. However, still "[...] this issue began to generate substantial interest during recent decades, in large part because families in which all of the adults work for pay have become much more common" (Bellavia, Frone 2004: 113). Paid employment may lead to conflicts in family life due to time demands from all involved parties. Time with family members, time for relaxation and fun, time for work, time for one's own interests – finding the right balance between these can cause stress and conflicts. The term WLB can be misleading at first glance, because one may assume a proper balance between work and life is always 50/50. Unfortunately, many people discover that most of the time the ratio between work and life can not be balanced this evenly. The individual WLB will even vary over time. However, what many business experts suggest avoiding is an all-consuming life style focussing only on one component of life (Kastner 2004; Wüstner 2009).

Taking a closer look at the history and development of WLB, we can observe a change of the focus over the years. The idea of WLB started in the United States, where, it was, initially, mainly applied in connection with women's issues:

*„The question of work-life balance has long been framed as a ‚women's issue‘ associated with the difficulty in combining paid work, dependent care and family life.“ (Lingard,*

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2 The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) can be called one of the first laws concerning WLB in the United States. It was for example followed by the Equal Pay Act in 1963 and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act in 1978.

Francis 2009: 39)

According to Resch (2003) the discussion on WLB was linked to the general discussion about healthy balance between working life and the rest of an employee's life before the focus shifted from supporting the mother's compatibility of work and education of the children to the interaction of different areas of work and life of women and men.

Furthermore, according to Lockwood (2003) the term WLB was coined in 1986, although it was not immediately used in everyday's language. However it was already in 1977 that Rosabeth Moss Kanter's seminal book, *Work and Family in the United States: A Critical Review and Agenda for Research and Policy*, "brought the issue of work/life balance to the forefront of research and organisations" (Lockwood 2003: 2).

Nevertheless, companies did not begin to offer Work/life programs until the 1980s and 1990s. Especially from the 1990s a number of cooperations and researchers started developing new balance strategies to improve both productivity and quality of life.

The term WLB is often used simultaneously with the term work-family balance, although there are more components to a balanced life besides work and family. The next part will briefly give an overview of these components.

## (2) Components of WLB

The term WLB is rooted in the appropriate prioritisation of work and life in a person's lifestyle. While work can be defined as the pursuit of a career, life combines four different components of prioritisation: (1) health (2) leisure (3) religion (4) family. Work, health, leisure, family and religion also can be called life-domains (Lothaller 2009). According to the boundary/border theory<sup>3</sup>, each of the numerous roles a person plays in life takes place within a specific domain. For example, the role of a father takes place at the family but the role of an employee takes place at work. In regard to a balanced life life-domains-conflicts should be avoided in favour of life-domains-facilitation.

I would like to give a short overview of the life-domains and relate them to each other.

### (a) Health

Health can be called the basis of WLB. If one is not healthy, neither work nor leisure, religion nor family life can be pursued. It therefore should be important for everyone to look after one's health concerning a healthy diet and sport. Apart from one's own interest in a healthy body,

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3 Boundary theory (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate 2000; Nippert-Eng 1996) and border theory (Clark 2000; Michaelson & Johnson 1997) implies that work and family are not separate spheres, but are interdependent domains or roles with permeable boundaries.

political measures as well as measures of the employers can help employees live a healthy life. Some firms have started to offer sport classes during lunch time for their employees or set up a sport room. As the study on Workplace Mental Health Promotion by the Canadian Mental Health Association shows, it can also be helpful if measures include a yearly check-up.

#### (b) Leisure

Leisure seen as the opposite of work is also a fundamental part of a well-balanced life. Stress from work must be counterbalanced by a certain time of relaxing, otherwise it will affect our health. This means if we work too much this will result in stress and other health problems. It is thus important to give employees time for themselves. This time can be used for one's hobbies and can also be combined with physical exercises.

#### (c) Religion

Although religion may not affect every person, it still is an important domain for employees with a religious background. They should be able to practice their religion unaffected by working time or overtime. Employees who cannot find time for their religious practices will feel additional stress which could result in inefficient work and may also affect the health of the person. Furthermore they could develop a feeling of dissatisfaction concerning their employer's view on their religious life.

#### (d) Family

A balanced realization of work and family life is well known nowadays since one can hear discussions on this issue in the media and it also affects not only every person with a family but also the society in its entirety. As mentioned in the introduction, the fertility rate in countries like Japan, Germany or the United States declined during recent years. There are certain possible reasons for that but the balance of work and family life seems to be a compelling argument of this debate. Since the number of working women has increased, raising children and continuing work has been a tough challenge not only for women interested in their work or even dependent upon their income but also for employers. Work should offer enough time for family for all employees. This also includes men, who, in Japan, are well known for their hard work and having little time for family and household participation. It should be noted that the balance of work and family is often used synonymous with the term WLB.

#### (e) Work

Work and one's career may not be the most important domain in life for everyone but for

anyone engaged in work, it is an important part of life. While we need the salary of our daily work to live, work also stimulates us with new ideas and it is not exclusively limited to paid work. Work is a potential catalyst of a person's development. It is therefore a very important domain of life even though it often interferes with the other domains.

Up to this point we can see that WLB has been the focus of considerable study. The realization of different domains in life which have to be balanced in order to live a harmonious life nevertheless dates back quite early. According to Kastner (2004) a good WLB is basically the maximization of quality of life. Therefore, after this short overview of the domains, I would like to clarify how quality of life can be maximized through WLB measures. Realizing WLB measures holds an enormous potential for changes in life quality.

### (3) Potential of WLB

According to Poelmans and Caligiuri "Work-life policies aim at enhancing the ability of employees to manage competing demands from work and personal interests and to alleviate work-family conflict" (Poelmans, Caligiuri 2008: 39). But how is this done? What kind of WLB measures can fulfill these potential goals?

The definitions in the section above tell us that WLB consists of a great many facets. The five different life domains lead to a variety of measures which I will summarize shortly to give some examples of various ways that WLB measures can influence life. I will further concentrate on the domain of work and family since these two components are in the focus of everyone's life nowadays. This will then bring the discussion back to the potential influence of WLB on Japanese families.

Each of the life domains requires adjustments for a balanced life to be achieved. Some of these adjustments may lead to similar results for the individual but also for the other involved person. According to Lingard and Francis effects of WLB measures can be divided in four different effects: organisational appearance, employment, financial appearance, and social exchange (Lingard, Francis 2009: 214 ff.). We can find all of the four in the succeeding information.

If we talk about health measures we might first think of gymnastic classes for employees mainly working in the office. This is a very obvious example. Employees working the whole day in the office, maybe with a computer, tend to akinesia which may result into long-term consequences for health (see Schneider, Windel, Zwingmann 2002). Physical exercises are therefore helpful for the people affected. It helps them to feel better and to prevent physical damage. Fit employees do not need to call in sick. This on the other hand contains advantages for every employer, too. If the employer is concerned about the health of his employees, it is also positive for the management of his company. A lot of sick employees who need to be replaced

are time-consuming and expensive.

Similarly, it is very satisfying for employees if they have enough time for leisure and self-fulfilment. Working the whole day and not having time for oneself may lead to physical and mental health problems. It also affects the relation between the employer and the employee. Not being satisfied with the atmosphere at one's own workplace affects work which again touches on the company's performance. The company's reputation and prestige may adversely be affected by this.

In reference to measures concerning the balance of work and family, Greenhaus and Collins note that "[...] work family balance often implies cutting back on work to spend more time with the family" (Greenhaus, Collins et al. 2003: 511). However the potential proceeds further than this. Family time is a very important part not only for children but also for the parents. The development of the child and the relationship of the couple and the family as a whole can be improved by the time spent together. Childcare is often a main problem within a balanced work-family life. Childcare leave is often a time of financial penalties for the employee and it bears financial and organizational problems for the employer as well. Although according to the SHRM® 2003 Benefits Survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, the percentage of employers offering family-friendly benefits have continued to increase, this number has remained relatively stable in recent years. The following five family-friendly benefits have been mentioned by the study: dependent care flexible spending accounts, flextime, family leave, telecommuting and compressed workweeks (see Lockwood 2003). Giving the opportunity to work at home, to work flextime, or to offer further education provisions during child care leave may contribute to the company's reputation. Also, measures which improve the re-entry into the workplace after child care leave can be very helpful for employees and for the employer who can rely on the re-entry of the employee and ties a qualified person to the company. Measures like a company kindergarten can be described as very much appreciated by employees. Furthermore this kind of social exchange promotes employees' initiative and the desire to stay with an organization. These measures are very profitable for the companies, too. If employees are satisfied their achievements at work will increase. These circumstances may also attract a lot of new job applicants for working at this specific company. If the conditions of employment are appealing, the company can also satisfy a high level of employment demands in regard to the applicants (Rost 2004; Poelmans; Caligiuri 2008).

As Lingard and Francis say:

*"One difficulty facing organizations is that, although a vast array of work-life supports exists, many of them are expensive to implement and managers do not know which combination of supports will yield the maximum benefit in terms of employees' work-life balance and organizational effectiveness."* (Lingard, Francis 2009: 184)

This is one of the reasons why the potential of WLB measures has not been used to its utmost



in many companies.

A very good example for this can be found at the Japanese workplace. Let me first give some information on the implementation of WLB Measures in Japan before showing in detail how much of their potential is ignored by Japanese companies.

### **3. Implementation of WLB Measures in Japan**

While all the above described life-domains are an important component of WLB, implementations of measures are only done in those areas where they are needed. This means that although problems with the balance of work, health, leisure, religion and family can be subsumed under WLB problems, it does not necessarily imply that people have problems with all of the mentioned life-domains. Therefore only implementations needed are taken on a selective basis to improve the conditions of life.

I would like to show that this is applicable for Japan's case as well. Especially in response to the sinking birthrate and the growing number of female employees, the Japanese government picked up the problem of balancing work and family life. But before concentrating on this one part of WLB, I will outline shortly the different life-domains and their handling in Japanese politics.

#### **(1) Life-Domains and its Significance**

In Japan, we can note increasing health problems like brain and heart diseases resulting from overwork (Iwasaki, Takahashi, Nakata 2006). However Japanese live a rather healthy life concerning their eating and sport habits. This might be a reason why research on balancing work and health has been conducted extensively on overwork (Kondo, Oh 2010; Shibata 2012).

Further on, Japan does not have a big potential for problems concerning conflicts with work and religious life. Bachika (2010: 12) describes "one important characteristic of religion in Japan: mutual tolerance, [...], religious pluralism". We can therefore hardly find any research done on the balance of religious and work life.

However, there are two of the described life-domains which play an important role in Japan: balance of work and leisure and balance of work and family.

The amount of the time spent at work in Japan is one of the highest among developed countries. According to the Population Census of the Japanese Statistics Bureau in 2005, on average a Japanese male regular employee was working 46.6 hours and a Japanese female regular employee was working 40.4 hours per week. Apart from various health risks, it is obvious that time for leisure and family is limited. We still know very little about the imbalance of leisure and work (Horne 1998). Due to the fact that working hours are high, we can conclude that personnel time is limited and that this may lead to a feeling of imbalance and unhappiness. One fact that supports the increase of these feelings is the high number of young unmarried

employees still living with their parents until marriage. There has been a lot of research on this phenomenon in the last years (Yamada 1999, Genda 2000, Lunsing 2003). Again this phenomenon is not only known in Japan. Living with parents while earning money bears some advantages, which also influence the conflict of work and leisure time. On the one hand, most of these so called Parasite Singles<sup>4</sup> do not have to pay rent for their own apartment and if they pay their parents the amount is very small. They therefore have enough money left to enjoy their leisure time going abroad on weekends or buying expensive goods. On the other hand, living at home with the parents saves time concerning all the necessary household tasks, which grants a big time advantage to the people concerned.

Once people get married leisure time decreases and turns into family time at a point. This is where we start talking about the balance of work and family life.

Long working hours take too much time away from family life. This mainly referred to Japanese male employees for a long time in the past since Japanese women used to stop working after giving birth and if they returned to work, they only worked part-time. Discussions on the term “absent father” had been in the media from the 1980s. The so called “absent father syndrome” is more than a media-amplified social trend as White (1993: 53) notes. According to Tanaka and Nakazawa (2005) fathers hardly seeing their children due to over work or job transfers may have difficulties building a relationship with their children. It is therefore complicated for fathers to spend time with children and play with them if the child does not know the playmate. It is moreover hard to educate children if they cannot relate to their father.

Furthermore it is not only the father who is working a lot nowadays. The number of female employees in Japan has risen during the past 20 years. It is therefore more difficult to solve the problem of imbalance concerning the missing time for family life. It is not only the time for educating the children which is missing; time for the married couple and time as a family is also lacking. In addition there should be mentioned another aspect in balancing family and work life which is gaining importance. Care of the elderly has long been associated with women who are known as the primary caregivers for elderly parents. However, due to the population’s aging, this seems to become a hard undertaking to balance, especially for the growing number of fulltime working women (Ogawa, Retherford, Saito 2010).

These problems give Japanese politicians a reason for concentrating on the imbalance of work and family. Achieving work-family balance developed into a meaningful task for Japanese politics and companies. I will therefore focus on the development of implementations in the area of balancing work and family life in the next part, especially concentrating on childcare.

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4 The term “Parasite Single” was coined by Yamada Masahiro and describes a single person who lives with their parents beyond their late twenties in order to enjoy a carefree and comfortable life. In 1999 Yamada spread this expression by publishing his bestselling book “The Age of Parasite Singles”.

## (2) Starting Point of Work-Family Balance Implementations

In April 1992 a law concerning parental leave was enforced. This law is called *Child Care and Family Care Leave Law*. The reason for its enforcement was the increasing number of female workers who wished to return to work after giving birth. However the law was only a revision of a similar law enacted in 1972: The *Working Women's Welfare Law*. Adopted by the Diet, it bears an important relationship with the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (EEOL). The Welfare Law was enacted against the background of high economic growths which led to an increased demand for additional labor (Lam 1992). Especially in the occupational fields of education (teaching and nursing), where a lot of female workers are employed, the desire for a law concerning child care was strong already in the late 1960s.

Until the enactment of the official law, some companies already made use of a similar arrangement. As Satō and Takeishi (2004: 19) illustrate, a petition was submitted by the labor union of Nihon Denshin Denwa Kōsha in 1961 and accepted in 1965. Nihon Denshin Denwa Kōsha can be called a leader on the way towards a harmonious WLB in companies. And other companies like Pioneer or Fuji Denki followed.

However the new law — especially before the enactment of the EEOL — only applied to working women. According to the Ministry of Labour 1990 there were 21.9% women taking parental leave before the enactment. The EEOL was reformed in 2006 to reflect changing familial and societal needs. This time the EEOL was broadened and included fathers as well.

With the revision of the law in 1992 it was also possible for fathers to take paternity leave. According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) in 2002, only 22.5% of fathers were eligible to take parental leave due to different regulations. The reason for this was a Labor-Management Agreement, which was concluded by many large enterprises. The regulation of paternal leave could be excluded by this agreement and therefore only a few companies allowed fathers to take parental leave when the wife was a housewife. Since the last legal reform, however, Labor-Management Agreements can no longer exclude the right to allow fathers to take childcare leave, independently of whether the wives are housewives or not. The law stipulates that mothers can take eight weeks of maternity leave after giving birth, while the father can apply for parental leave, which allows both partners to take a leave and spend time with the family. Further, due to the increasing number of women continuing their job after giving birth, the rule applies to a growing number of families. In addition, the Act on Advancement of Measures to Support Raising Next-Generation Children of April 2005 encourages companies to formulate action plans to reinforce their male employees to take childcare leave in order to be authorized. The certification represents recognition of support for employees to balance responsibilities between the company and family. Still only a few Japanese fathers take parental leave — only 2.63%, according to the Health and Welfare ministry. What are reasons for the small percentage? Why do a lot of women still quit their job after giving birth and fathers do not take some time of to spend with their new family?

### (3) Lack of Strength

There are different approaches explaining the low usage of parental leave and the minor acceptance of WLB measures. Some important reasons are mentioned in the following to show what problems should be approached in the future to improve WLB conditions for all the persons concerned.

As mentioned above a lot of women already quit their job before giving birth. This is mainly motivated by the fear of not being able to combine work and family (Tomita 1994). The fact that the total care of children merely should be shouldered by mothers is still a widely held opinion in Japan. The fear of managing work and family can therefore not be rejected. However, based on the Work and Life Balance Report 2012 more -especially permanent- female employees continue working after giving birth and take parental leave. This can be seen as a policy effect. Income security might be one reason for this. In 1991, the Child Care Leave System was introduced which has provided both male and female workers with income security for the first year after birth<sup>5</sup>. Parents are guaranteed 50% of their regular income and they are exempted from social insurance premiums. Implementation by the government and the companies has been taken place, but based on the small number of people taking childcare leave, so far it seems not to be enough. The lack of childcare is just one example for this. Let me now return to the father's side. There are of course a lot of fathers who are interested in education and spending time with their family. However, it is not easy for men to take parental leave or just return home early because of their family life. It is hard to find like-minded people and to exchange views about their wishes and problems as a father. Although the Act on Advancement of Measures to Support Raising Next-Generation Children stipulates paternal leave and shortening work hours is becoming a mandatory measure according to the the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan's published guidelines entitled '*Comprehensive Program for the Prevention of Health Impairment Due to Overwork*', fathers did not play an important role in education in the past decades. Some companies still cannot understand why fathers currently do not want to sacrifice their whole life to the company and their work (Atsumi 2007). Men also worry if a break effects their promotion in the end. And of course taking parental leave entails a decrease in income such that equal participation in family life between women and men is difficult to achieve (Takeishi 2004). Working about 40 hours weekly on the average makes it impossible for either women or men to concentrate on work, education and household tasks (Matsuda 2008). However in the wake of the Act on Advancement of Measures to Support Raising Next-Generation Children projects like the "Ikumen Project" emerged. This is a government campaign launched in 2010 to encourage Japanese men to take a more active role in parenting. In the same year the Act on the Welfare of Workers Who Take Care of Children or

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5 Since April 2005, however, income security can be extended for up to eighteen months. This is related to the lack of child care facilities.

Other Family Members Including Child Care and Family Care Leave was revised and the “Papa & Mama Child Care Leave Plus” was introduced. In order to support father’s participation in child rearing the period of leave will be extended when both mother and father take child care leave. These are two examples of active political measurements concerning parental leave and WLB.

This gives us an idea about the current status of WLB implementation in Japan. Lingard and Francis already noted in general: “While work-life benefits can be very helpful, they are also often under-utilized by workers who are eligible to use them, especially by men” (Lingard, Francis 2009: 302). Although we can find regulations, laws, and a big interest from the persons concerned in Japan, too, WLB measures are not used by either companies or individuals to an extent which would evoke a degree of satisfaction with the situation. We can call this a lack of strength of WLB measures and its acceptance in society. Employees as well as employers do not seem to exhaust every possibility, whether it is taking parental leave or encouraging their employees to take it. As mentioned in chapter two, it would be good for companies — although this might cause inconvenience concerning personnel management — to encourage their employees to take a leave in regard to their employees’ satisfaction and the outcome of work.

Japanese employees on the other hand wish to make use of WLB measures to a greater extent but still do not see the possibility to do so in their work life. I would like to provide a further detailed look on this in the next section.

#### **4. Balance of Japanese Work and Family Life**

Taking parental leave for fathers is a very important step towards a good relationship with their child and also towards a good relationship with their partner. Japanese fathers missed most of their family life for a long time, mainly due to long working hours. But in regard to the increasing interest of women to return to their workplace after giving birth, fathers are needed in educational and household tasks as well. According to new statistics of the Kyoritsu Research Institute, young men wish to participate in their future’s children’s life (2012). This makes clear that it would be a big advantage if fathers can easily take parental leave. Unfortunately only a very small percentage of male employees has taken some time off so far. Mothers do take parental leave to a high degree – unless they are not quitting their job – to take care of their child. Still a lot of them feel uncomfortable with it because they see their leave as a burden to the company. Therefore, besides their fear of lacking technical knowledge after their return, they are not sure if they can return to work easily after their break and balance childcare and work.

However both sides – companies and parents – should try to use the huge potential WLB measures offer. Due to the shrinking labor force Japanese companies do need, and many also wish to recruit female employees. Raising female labor participation rates not only improves gender equality but also helps to revitalize and maintain growth rates. Nevertheless this cannot be successful if women do not feel satisfied and understood at their workplace. Therefore

companies should tap the full potential WLB strategies can give. In the short term, making use of measures results in recruiting and keeping good employees. In the medium run it also affects the company's image and the loyalty towards the company. For the long term it will be possible for companies to arrange and structure their measures. Image, loyalty and recruitment of outstanding employees are also important keywords when it comes to the potential of WLB concerning Japanese men. All these can in the end reciprocally satisfy the employees as well as the companies.

Japanese Family mainly lacks time and flexibility when it comes to the balance of work and family. But the usage of flexible working systems as one possible strategy would have a big influence on family life. There are companies like Ana<sup>6</sup> or Shiseido<sup>7</sup>, which are well-known for their good-working innovative WLB strategies. Indeed, their ideas like offering not only parental leave but also training opportunities and a good flow of information exchange during the leave are strategies which are highly appreciated by employees. Childcare offered by the companies also saves time and encourages employees to decide to build a family. To know that childcare is provided by the company and that aiming for a balanced life is accepted and even supported by the company might boost the acceptance of WLB measures. Some of the social problems Japanese politics were focusing on when WLB measures first were considered could not be solved due to the society's lacking acceptance.

Another positive effect to note is the active interest and participation in NPO movements and associations. A lot of NPOs focusing on WLB, working mothers, and fathers' participation in childcare emerged during the last years<sup>8</sup>. The discussions on WLB have strengthened the interest in these topics and this also modifies the societal view on family life. Workshops for couples trying to give inspiration on a good and balanced partnership like the Mothering Project or seminars on education especially made for fathers like the Fathering School of the NPO Fathering Japan are indicators for the interest in a changing family life-style (<http://www.fathering.jp/school/>).

Although there is still more encouragement and implementation of WLB measures needed, we can see that the activity on WLB has a diverse influence on Japanese family life. Measures should be used to intensify this change to meet the goals of a desired life-style and family life of each person.

## 5. Conclusion

“Work-Life Balance isn't only about families and childcare. Nor is it about working

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6 <http://www.anahd.co.jp/en/csr/employees/worklife.html>

7 <http://group.shiseido.com/csr/labor/working.html>

8 Notably are: NPO Work-Life Balance Suishin Kyōryoku Kikō, NPO Florence, NPO Fathering Japan, or NPO Work-Life Supporter.

less. It's about working 'smart'. About being fresh enough to give all you need to both work and home, without jeopardising one for the other. And it's a necessity for everyone, at whatever your stage in life." (Department of Trade and Industry 2001: 5)

Working smart, using the possibilities WLB measures offer, and achieving the desired life-style can be called a preferable way to a happy life. Still putting this into practice is rather difficult. Especially in Japan there has been no obvious change so far in working hours and the therefore resulting time lack for family life. As Lingard and Francis note, barriers to taking up WLB measures are fear of stigmatization, missing contact and social exchange, and a sensitivity of gender (Lingard, Francis 2009: 227 ff.). This applies to Japan as well and companies therefore have to put much more effort into encouraging their employees to make use of WLB. Also superiors should develop a positive attitude towards the usage of WLB measures since this can foster a climate in which colleagues support each other in the pursuit of a balanced life.

Furthermore while trying to find the right balance we should not forget about the child as well. Doing the best for the family is up to one's own discretion. There is no perfect balance to strive for. However to put somebody else in charge of one's own child for the whole day and concentrate on one's own business, represents a risk which should be considered when thinking about WLB. Parental leave for example should be a time to spend with the child. Concentrating on one's own career by using training opportunities can be seen as an advantage in modern work life but it also can be seen as a negative factor of influence concerning the balance from the conservative critic's point of view. According to the border theory, "work and family are not 'separate spheres', but interdependent domains or roles with 'permeable' boundaries" (Desrochers, Sargent 2004: 40). It therefore can be difficult to find one's own balance even during parental leave.

This shows us that WLB clearly is an issue for governments, organizations and individuals alike. One of the principal aims of this essay is to examine how WLB measures can be used as an innovative concept to realize a balanced family life in Japan. The theoretical background provided in section two gave an overview about how the various life-domains can be affected by WLB measures and outlined the potential WLB bears. After considering the most important implementations of WLB measures in Japan, a closer look at the balance of Japanese work and family was the logical next step. This approach made clear the potential influence WLB has on Japanese family life. WLB measures should not solely be used for female employees. Addressing fathers as well as mothers can lead to a change in family life and family roles. WLB can be called a concept for improving the quality of life. However it is very important to find one's own way in handling personnel resources. It should be possible to use the full potential of WLB freely to a degree that shows innovation.

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